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The nice surprise is the price

[illegible]

NEW ZEALAND

Helicopters are banned and mobile phones don't work. John Westbrooke enjoys the remote beauty of the South Island

New Zealand is a tectonic treat, a long, thin country created as the Indo-Australian and Pacific plates push each other upward. But who would have thought you can not only see where they collide, but feel it and smell it?

We visited Arthur's Pass, the highest road over the country's highest mountains, in the company of Dr Gerry McSweeney, botanist, eco-warrior and hotelier. A short way down the western side of the road, he took us to a cliff side where the rock strata were exposed.

"That's it there," and he pointed to one particularly dark seam of rock, the line where the plates meet. "And look at this." Squatting down, he pointed to a small spring of water. It smelt sulphurous, and it was noticeably warmer than the icy mountain streams running down the roadside, as if squeezed out by the friction of vast sections of the earth's crust rubbing together.

And that is more or less what it was. Some day, tourists may come to gawp at this evidence of the planet at work; but for now, the road was deserted - just the crisp blue air, the peaks of the Southern Alps with their first dusting of winter snows, and us. If this is the Pacific Ring of Fire, it is a peaceful place.

Driving to Arthur's Pass from Christchurch, on the east coast of the South Island, or Greymouth on the west, is easy enough, along the routes pioneered during the gold rushes of the 1860s. But a better way to get there is on one of the world's great train journeys, the Trans-Alpine. It makes the coast-to-coast journey and back every day from Christchurch, at no great speed, in comfortable carriages with big scenic windows and an outdoor car crowded with photographers.

For a while it crosses the Canterbury Plains, where grain grows and sheep graze, before beginning its climb up the broad shingle valley of the braided Waimakariri River. The line runs along high bridges over wooded valleys, past bogs and tarns and tussock, close-cropped yellow-green hills and deep



High country: the Waimakariri River valley makes its way through New Zealand's Southern Alps at Arthur's Pass

John Westbrooke

The wonderful wizard of NZ

blue lakes, and up to the rainforest which begins near Arthur's Pass and covers much of the western slopes of the Southern Alps. (The mountains trap the east-bound rain, making the coast notoriously wet.)

After that, you can wind down past more rivers, lakes and sheep to Greymouth, and after an hour's stopover return to Christchurch. But we broke our journey 3,000ft up at the McSweeney's luxury Wilderness Lodge for the night.

You could sit in your room all day; not only does each one look out across the valley called *Te Ko Awa a Aniwaniwa* - "Valley of the rainbows" - but each has a dressing-table mirror carefully placed so you can see the highest

mountains from your bed.

But Gerry McSweeney's specialty is nature walks among New Zealand's unique plants and animals. He knows every plant around, from giant buttercups to native beeches, shy ferns to towering rimu trees, which would have been felled by loggers a century ago if they had been discovered in the dense bush.

He was a director of the Forest and Bird Protection Society for years, and his campaigns against logging and for conservation predictably made him enemies as well as friends (count me among the latter). In 1988, he and his wife decided to prove ecotourism could pay, by opening first a 20-room guest lodge down on the west coast, close to rainforest,

penguins and seals, and then the Arthur's Pass lodge.

Attached to it is a working sheep farm. "I was due to take some American guests on a walk one morning, but I also had to muster round up the sheep," says McSweeney. "So I asked them who'd like to come out at 5.30am and help catch sheep. Their hands all shot up."

"The highlight for them was when another bus full of tourists saw them, thought they were all local sheep farmers, and stopped to take their photos."

Still, it may be a pointer to the future of the economy of New Zealand - famously a country of 3.5m people and 45m sheep - that the tourist lodge is far more profitable than the farm.

As well as helping out with the shearing, guests can ski in the unsophisticated local fields, look for kiwi and kea - raucous, thieving mountain parrots -

If this is the Pacific Ring of Fire, it is a peaceful place

go on guided night walks under the Southern Cross, or just relax and recharge their batteries. Gentle kayaking is possible, bungee jumping is not; helicopters are banned and mobile phones do not

work. You go there for the beauty and remoteness, not for adrenalin activities.

In the evening, enjoy good cooking and watch the stars through the house telescope: with no light pollution, there are more than most city dwellers would believe possible.

Not that city life in the South Island is very frantic. Greymouth is a small town with good craft shops: the west coast has deposits of greenstone (jade), another byproduct of geological activity, which Maoris have long valued and carved.

Christchurch is a bigger proposition, settled last century by the Church of England in imitation of an imaginary English market town. The grey stone cathedral, designed by George Gil-

bert Scott, still stands in the central square, although diminished by the ugly post-modern Noddyland architecture around it.

It is, however, enlivened by the lunchtime perorations of the Wizard - self-proclaimed living work of art, theorist of the fun revolution, role model for post-feminist man, and metaphysical engineer - who wears a black cape and pointed hat, pontificates wittily on modern life and offers up rain spells or blesses rugby players' underpants.

You can ride through the heart of town by tram, go punting on the Avon River, which winds its way through the city under willow trees, or stroll past carefully tended gardens surrounding suburban bungalows. A big

city in South Island terms, Christchurch is not far in spirit from the farming hamlets on the plains or the blissful isolation of the Arthur's Pass high country.

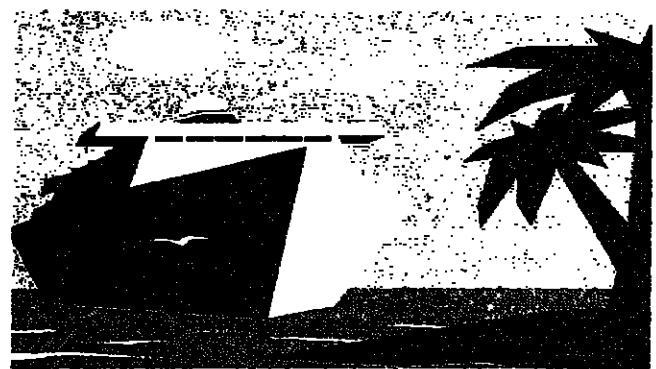
John Westbrooke was a guest of Air New Zealand (tel: 0181-741 2261) which flies from London to New Zealand six times a week from 26th, and of the New Zealand Tourism Board (0539-300900 in the UK. 50p a minute; or www.nzta.govt.nz).

At the Wilderness Lodge, tel: +64 3 318 8248, nightly rates start at NZ\$195 (USD - the New Zealand dollar is weak) and include breakfast, dinner and two walks.

Trans-Alpine trips cost NZ\$99 return and can be booked on +64 4 498 3303 outside the country. The Wizard is on www.wizard.gen.nz

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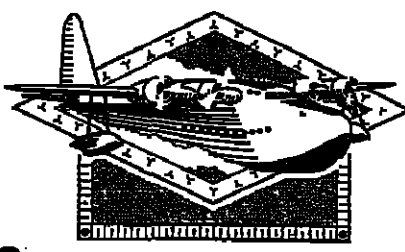
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SOUTH AMERICA

An utterly bewitching time in Bolivia

So just what are llama fetuses sold for? Guy Marks travelled to La Paz to find out

The witch was sullen. She sat on a stool in a corner, her stall of wares. I wondered if she could be selling eyes of frog and toe of toad, but I didn't dare find out. She had a look about her that was welcoming. Piercing eyes, sunk in a worn leather face, glared out from beneath the brow of her bowler hat, casting disdain on passers-by. I could hear her message without it being spoken: "Point that camera at me and I'll turn you into a toad." I moved on down the street. It was a narrow cobbled alleyway running along the steep hillside in the city centre of La Paz.

Above it the "smugglers market", where western consumer goods with dubious origins can be bought at bargain prices. Below it is the Plaza de San Francisco with its baroque plonial church; an inconspicuous facade of ornate, sculptured stone-work.

Sandwiched between these two monuments to imported culture, this alleyway is a haven of the Bolivian heritage. It is full of bright colours, of art shops selling rich red oven textiles, shawls, hand-work and alpaca blankets. Musical instrument makers sit whittling at sticks of bamboo to make Andean pan pipes, and rob armallos of their armour to provide the bodies for Charapans - the traditional stringed instrument.

In amongst these workshops is the odd tourist trap selling mock-alpaca jumpers and five-year-old antiques. In front of a shop are the stalls for which the street has become famous. The women will tend them as not artisans, but purveyors of ritual and ritualistic paraphernalia. They are the wives of La Paz. Although many a tourist

walks this street, the witches' market is not there as a tourist attraction. It is a genuine part of Bolivian culture, drawing on ancient Andean beliefs that are still respected today. People from all walks of life come to this market to buy the ingredients for offerings to the spirit world.

According to Felix, my guide, it was disrespectful for this culture by foreign visitors that had made some of the women so sullen. He took me further down the street to talk to the second

The first ingredient was a layer of an aromatic herb called Koa, said to please the spirits

witch. Here we received a much warmer reception. With a smile, she held out a basket full of strange objects and, through Felix, explained what they were for. All the objects were to bring luck in one form or another and this collection, known as a *cho'la*, formed the basis of an all-purpose offering.

The basket was lined with white paper, white signifying a spell for good rather than a spell for evil. The first ingredient was a layer of an aromatic herb called Koa, said to please the spirits. Then the charms were added. These were a mixture of amulets made of clay or sugar with reliefs depicting scenes from everyday life.

Each represented the desires and aspirations of the person making the offering. A bag of money on a



One of the so-called witches of La Paz, selling llama fetuses: a genuine part of Bolivian culture

John Westbrook

desk would bring luck in business, pictures of animals would bring health and fertility to a farmer's livestock, a courting couple would bring luck in love.

In amongst the charms were crosses and communion hosts, not because she was hedging her bets, but because Christianity has been incorporated into

Andean religion. To complete the *cho'la* she had added seeds and nuts, symbols of abundance and well-being. The whole thing was then topped off with a dried llama fetus decorated with coloured cotton and wool.

However bizarre this might appear, it had its place in symbolism. Llamas are thought of as messengers

to the gods and Apus - the mountain spirits. No serious offering was therefore complete without a llama fetus to carry the message beyond the physical world. The *cho'la* would be burnt or buried according to the witch's instruction. Although this one was already made up as part of her display, they were

usually made to order. Most of the symbols were for good luck, but there were just a few for bad luck, to cast spells and gain revenge on enemies. Perhaps the most potent of Andean gods is Pachamama. She is mother earth, an all-powerful, all-embracing life-force. The witch's stall was lined with small carvings repre-

senting this goddess; effigies carved with three human faces, a snake for protection, a turtle for health and a frog for wealth. I bought one for a couple of pounds and moved on to the next stall. The third witch was only 25. Her name was Ines and she lacked the haggard image that goes with the territory. Felix was enchanted

by her, and between us we chatted away about the use of nearly every single thing on her stall. She had a broader range of charms than the other witches, including some animal skins which she pulled from under the table. She held the pelt of a small Andean fox and ran her hands through its whiskers, explaining the magical powers.

If someone was suffering from grief, then an infusion of these thick hairs would put them back on track. As well as these traditional Andean medicines and charms, she offered goods from other cultures.

She had boxes and bags of herbal remedies and potions from India and south-east

She held a fox pelt and ran her hands through its whiskers, explaining the magical powers

Asia. For myself, though, I stuck with the Bolivian mythology and asked her for something to keep me safe on my travels. She produced a small clay amulet of a stylised condor-headed figure. This Andean bird has become a symbol of good luck for the traveller.

Perhaps Andean beliefs have survived because of their adaptability. It seemed appropriate that this magnificent bird should have become a frequent flyer's talisman, and at just 20p, it was the cheapest travel insurance I had ever bought. **Guy Marks' visit to the Witches' Market was arranged by Crillon Tours, which operates cultural programmes, hotels and tours in Bolivia. Tel: La Paz +591 2 3745667 or find them on the internet at <http://www.tidoc.com>**

Learning the A to Z of Amazonian daily life

Bill Glenton keeps taking the tablets as he presses forward on a voyage of discovery through the Peruvian rainforest

Aimed with insect repellent, sunblock and cameras, we hunched ourselves into the dense jungle. Facing the peril of giant anacondas, hungry caymans and the odd free-toed sloth, we put our agile faith in the Lord, got luck and the tour schedule holy writ to get us out alive.

Wild life is never more rampant than along the upper reaches of the mighty Amazon. Exploring its thickly overgrown tributaries in tiny Zodiac craft reduces you to feeling like a water bug trapped in a reed bed.

Impenetrable is hardly the word for it. This jungle is more like a natural fortress. Even when you squeeze through its outer defences it can drop portcullis in the shape of a massive fallen tree to block the way. For myself and the other 58 would-be explorers on our expedition cruise 2,000 miles from the Atlantic, it was frustrating to get so close and yet so far from the real action. I felt more like a pauper peering through the railings of a zoo, unable to ford the admission fee.

Occasionally we had glimpses of monkeys swinging through the thick forest and, yes, we did see a tapir and a red-footed booby - very young, kept as pets by the local Indians. The keen twitchers among us fared better. They were treated to a constant display of parrots and other exotic birds.

For those of us who could not tell a masked crimson tanager from a ruddy pigeon we relied on the quick-fire commentary of our expert

guides. But I was still searching for the orange-fronted phoebe that we had seen in the red-eyed vireo had whizzed by.

There was no problem identifying a more familiar species - the red-eyed passenger. We were a bleary-looking lot facing the first of the day's expeditions. A hazard of jungle exploration we had never considered was having to get up before dawn if we wanted to see the wild life at its most active. Sensibly, it hides itself even more in the heat of the day.

Once we set out at night in the hope of seeing nocturnal creatures. Yet they proved just as shy, with only frogs and the beady eyes of a cayman to satisfy our growing zoological hunger.

I only wish the myriad insect life was as discreet. As much as we carefully observed the strictures to cover all our limbs and spray ourselves with repellent, the mosquitoes - even wasps - penetrated our defences. In this malarial, yellow fever zone the need to take the tablets and be inoculated is obvious.

Not so obvious, perhaps, is the vital need for a double, overall garment to keep dry. The problem with rainforests is that it rains. Twice I was soaked to the skin by Niagara-volume cloudbursts. When you are speeding through one in an open Zodiac, it is like going through a carwash.

We could, at least, get warm and dry aboard our mother ship, the aptly named Explorer. But there was another kind of more stinging rainfall that left less bearable marks. Ants. As our craft brushed the

overhanging vegetation they fell in their hungry scores upon us to give a whole new meaning to "travel itch".

The smell of insect sprays and balm became more familiar than the usual perfumes worn by our women passengers. In the jungle, a dab of Chanel No 5 is a sure-fire way of attracting the wrong kind of attention.

Clearly our tender western

This was far from being a typical cruise, and the Explorer is far from being a conventional cruise ship

flesh made for a tasty dish. I felt like an over-dressed intruder in a nudist camp when we called at one of their simple, grass-hutted villages to watch bare-breasted women perform a supposed ritual fertility dance. Even in this remote region you cannot escape the inevitable folk dancing.

Yet this was far from being a typical cruise, and the Explorer is far from being a conventional cruise ship. Known as the "Little Red Ship", the 2,388 ton vessel was built specially for adventure trips and set the growing trend for such expeditions nearly 30 years ago. It has poked its bows into more oceanic nooks and crannies than a Jack Russell into rabbit holes.

Its cabins (with tiny private bathrooms) are cramped compared with those on many ships, and it has limited public room space, but makes up for this with a big team of leading lecturers and friendly, intimate charm.

With its ice-strengthened hull Explorer can go deep into the Antarctic and Arctic. You will not find any other cruise ship with Iquitos on the itinerary. In fact, most of our mainly American passengers and myself

had trouble finding it ourselves.

Twice our jet from Miami tried to land at its airport, but was driven off by a rainstorm. We had to fly on to Lima, Peru's capital, for an unscheduled night's stay before we could fly back to Iquitos a day late for our planned week-long voyage.

This surprisingly large Peruvian port can be reached only by air or river. Isolated amidst the dense jungle it has prospered from successive booms in rubber and oil. In between this strange mix of Wild West and colonial Spain it served as a vital American lifeline. From here came the chicla to make its essential chewing gum.

Even the mighty Amazon can leave Iquitos stranded outside the rainy season when the river level drops. It was a muddy torrent when we made our round trip from the port. The ship's bows cut through the water like a ploughshare turning over a furrow.

Every day we anchored once or twice to make our jungle expeditions with no other company than Indians. Our only other contact with the outside world was when we called at the remote port of Letitia, a bustling, largely Indian town.

The coca plant thrives naturally in the Peruvian jungle but there was not a drug baron in sight at Letitia. If there was any cocaine on sale, it was submerged by a cornucopia of tropical fruit and a scrum of Indians, pigs, chickens and ducks in the waterfront market.

However, I was told that the Indians chew the coca plant to keep themselves alert while fishing for long periods from their canoes.

The Amazon can hold as many terrors as the jungle - at least for us on our organised angling trips. We should have guessed as much when we were given juicy red chunks of beef for bait. The infamous piranhas, with their needle-sharp teeth, loved it. Then, so did the aptly named devil fish with their poisonous barbs, and the equally fierce-looking catfish.



The Amazon way of life. I felt like an over-dressed intruder in a nudist camp when we called at a simple, grass-hutted village

Even the many dolphins we saw - they have developed an unusually long snout - had an uncanny gruesomeness that would render them certain Disney rejects. They were also less friendly than the dolphins I had been used to seeing.

But not so the local Indians who welcomed us everywhere. Nor was it the mighty American dollar they

wanted. Our currency for buying their simple handicrafts was much sought-after - T-shirts, jeans and track shoes.

This was a rare trip - most of us flew home with less clothing than when we set out. What casual gear we had left was donated to the ship's scheme to supply much-needed garments to the poorer Indians.

But we were richer for the cruise's unique experience. It was certainly an education, if only for the thrice-daily lectures on Amazonian life which ranged from anthropology to zoology. We may have been disappointed with not getting to closer grips with some of the wildlife, but at least no one could accuse us of laying the rainforest to

waste. We left it as innocently green as we undoubtedly were.

The Explorer is operated by Abercrombie and Kent Travel, Skene Square House, Holborn Place, London, SW1 1WNS. Tel: 0171-730 9600, fax: 0171-730 9376. Amazon fares range from £2,339 to £2,667, inclusive of return flight and according to cabin category and length of cruise.

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CARIBBEAN



Fast food in one of the most cosmopolitan societies on earth: The most basic of Trinidad's food traditions issues from Creole cooking

Armando Anderson

Try everything except cow-heel soup

Nicholas Woodsworth went to Port of Spain in search of genuine Trinidadian food. His tastebuds are still recovering

I am never happier, travelling in some strange corner of the world, than when sampling a meal that can be found there and only there. It is the odd, local dish, after all, not the bland, universal one, that reveals the diner's true appetites.

But the day I arrived in Trinidad, I must admit, I spent lunchtime looking desperately for something to eat. There was no dearth of food in Port of Spain's hot and crowded streets - in dozens of small, hole-in-the-wall establishments diners were busy downing brimming bowls of cow-skin soup, pig-tail, and cow-heel soup with gusto. It all seemed just a bit too odd and a bit too local to sit down and join in.

Better to swallow pride and self-respect than to swallow cow-heel soup, I decided. I took myself off to the blindest place I could find. In the Excellent City Centre, Port of Spain's air-conditioned American-style shopping mall, I discovered an international food court. Here at half-a-dozen shiny cafeteria-style counters was

food from Europe, India, China and the Middle East. I was not disappointed with the *hot-sin* chicken and stir-fried noodles I settled on at the Happy Palace counter. But I was disappointed with myself.

This was not the way to eat. This was not Trinidadian food - this was a tail-between-the-legs retreat to the international food destined by all *bona fide* food adventurers.

Was I losing my taste for the genuine, I wondered? In my time I had braved, almost without blanching, snake meat in Guangzhou and sea slug in the Sulu Sea. This would not do. I slunk out of the Excellent City Centre set on eating locally - not a morsel of off-island food, I determined, would pass my lips.

The days passed, and I continued to eat European, Chinese, Indian and Middle Eastern meals. For, it turned out, I could not have been more wrong - all the foods in the mall were local and genuinely Trinidadian. Brought to the island over centuries by its many far-flung cultures, they are

now enjoyed by everyone here. One has only to look at the faces on a Port of Spain street to see that this is one of the most cosmopolitan societies on earth.

It is on the street, in fact, that some of the most authentic and popular foods of Trinidad are enjoyed. Port-of-Spanish are con-

I sampled large blue crabs beside cornflour and cassava dumplings in boiling coconut milk

stantly rushing about, and on busy weekdays rarely have time for relaxed meals. But their exuberance for life is reflected in their love of food and cooking, and all over the city sidewalks are crowded with snack shops, bars, food stands, markets and impromptu restaurants.

Not all of them serve cow-heel soup.

My own initial favourites were the *rotis* stands. In India *roti* refers simply to round, flat, *chapati* bread. In Trinidad the bread - two layers of dough stuffed with ground split peas - is just the beginning. Into it goes curried meats, shrimp or vegetables, and then a layer of spiced chick peas or potatoes. The whole is then folded, making a complete portable meal. It is the most popular food of all, as entire rows of frantically busy city *roti* stands attest.

From *rotis* I graduated to other island specialties. In the Home Style Restaurant, I sampled curried crabs and dumplings - large blue crabs simmered beside cornflour and cassava dumplings in boiling coconut milk.

At the Tai Hing restaurant I tasted shrimp chow mein, sweet and "browned down" with caramelised sugar in the island style. On Independence Square I tried Lebanese potato salad and kebabs. There, too, I ate *arepas*, native patties stuffed with chicken, a legacy of Trinidad's 300 years of Spanish colonisation.

I ventured into even more exotic territory. On a St James sidewalk late one boozing night, along with dozens of other revellers, I sipped corn soup, thick with kernels and loaded with pepper sauce - the perfect anti-

dote, it is said, to too much rum.

On Maracas beach I bit into "bake and shark", deep-fried bread stuffed with shark steaks and flavoured with a variety of spicy chutney sauces - papaya, lime, cilantro and fiery yellow pepper.

Even refreshments as simple as the chilled green coconuts sold from trucks around Port of Spain's vast, grassy park, the Savannah, were delicious - first, one drinks the clear, cooling liquid, then, with a spoon fashioned in seconds from the husk by a vendor's flashing machete, one quickly scoops out the soft, sweet, translucent jelly inside.

Now, this was all well and good, but as I ate my way through different cultures, I realised I was avoiding the central issue. The most basic of Trinidad's food traditions issue from Creole cooking - the foods evolved by black Africans making the most of their own traditions, backyard ingredients, and the often less-than-prime provisions doled out by their French slave-masters.

This is the island's most serious eating - cow-skin soup, pig-tail and cow-heel all spring from it - and when I arrived in the tiny coastal Afro-Caribbean village of Blanchisseuse, I resolved to tackle it head on. Luckily, in the person of plump, genial Sita Joyeau, I

found the ideal Creole food interpreter. Taught by her grandmother, she found herself as a young girl helping cook holiday and Sunday feasts for a vast extended family.

She has been cooking ever since. Sita is also consulted by Blanchisseuse villagers in the arcane and much-

I cannot say I found the gluey and gelatinous hunk of boiled cow hoof terribly appealing

reversed art of medicinal herb and plant cures. She took me into the kitchen and, in chopping, slicing, mixing and simmering, showed me a cuisine that was hardly as frightful as they sound.

Callaloo, *cocoa pelau*, *bul-jol* - such foods are highly popular on the island and all, I discovered, taste fine. *Callaloo*, virtually a national dish, is a puréed mixture of okra and taro - two plants brought from Africa and essential in the slave diet. Flavoured with salted pork or crab, it is poured over rice.

Cococo turned out to be nothing more alarming than a blend of cornmeal flour and okra, bound, as so much Creole food is, with coconut milk. *Pelau* is a tasty blend of cinnamon-spiced rice and peas. *Bul-jol*, a dried-fish dish, is particularly popular in a coastal community like Blanchisseuse.

Fish here is often smoked over coconut husks and bay leaves, then sun-dried. Later soaked, it is tossed in hot coconut oil with tomatoes, hot peppers and onions. All stand comparison with what I regard as Sita's *chef d'oeuvre*, green banana salad served beside duck curried with cilantro, garlic, ginger and massala.

And so to cow-heel soup. Sita made it, I tried it, and to be honest - in spite of the covering flavours of split peas, pumpkin, carrots, yam, celery, taro and onions - I cannot say I found the gluey and gelatinous hunk of boiled cow hoof I found submerged there terribly appealing.

But there is a reason for everything, including the popularity of cow-heel soup. "Our men consume anything they think will improve their virility," she laughed. "They devour the sea urchins off the rocks. They strip so much bark off the *habande* tree [from the French *bois blanc* - swollen wood] that it droops over and dies. But there is nothing to beat cow-heel soup - it has something to do with all that glue. Men cannot get enough of it."

I cast my mind back to other outlandish meals I had eaten. It seemed to me I remembered vague, similarly extravagant claims for snake meat and sea slugs.

Mentally I filed cow-heel soup away in the same category of peculiar foods, and carried on enjoying Trinidadian cooking. Odd local dishes do indeed sometimes reveal the diner's true appetites.

It's not such a wild world

These are trying times for travellers. Bombs (Ca? Town), kidnappings (Yemen), murders (the Bahamas): it used to be that these were internal matters, but now tourists can be actively targeted.

So where do you go to ensure a safe holiday? The answer, as always, is: just about anywhere, rely. But to be doubly sure, ask the Foreign Office. It offers frequently updated advice about security in more than 120 countries, by phone on 0171-238 4503, a BBC2 Ceefax on page 470 on, and (much the quickest) on the internet www.fco.gov.uk.

At present it advises against any travel to 14 places, from Afghanistan to Western Sahara, and all but essential travel to 11 more (Pakistan and south-east Turkey among them). The FCO has no power to ban citizens from going anywhere, but travel insurers may use its warnings as an excuse not to recompense people whose trips have been cancelled.

Most FO advice, though, is of a less intimidating nature. India: beware car men, drive with care. Croatia: tick-bone encephalitis. France and Florida: watch out for hire cars with giveaway number plates. Holland: don't take druged drinks from strangers. Sri Lanka: take US dollars in pristine condition.

The US State Department's warnings - see travel.state.gov/travel_warnings.html - are sometimes stronger than the FO's, perhaps because Americans are seen as being a greater risk.

Americans often look like rich targets to go pickpockets; and with ideological objections to capitalism, Christianity or Washington's role as Globocorp may strike at anything representing Uncle Sam, from embassies to Planet Hollywood.

Some countries clearly require more than usual care. This may appear to include Islamic countries where westerners might be resented, though the State Department and FO are calm about Kenya and Tanzania, scenes of the recent US embassy bombings, merely advising caution.

And among popular destinations which still require care about your possessions, South Africa and Brazil, where the FO notes high crime rates.

What can you do to reduce risks? Much as you'd do at home: dress down; leave jewelry behind. Stay away from poor parts of town. Be streetwise about popular scams: the stranger who points out mud on your jacket and picks your pocket while you look, the "policeman" who asks to inspect your documents, the passing driver who tells you that you have a flat tyre.

With countries such as Jamaica, Fiji, Spain, Turkey, the FO is pains to stress that "most people have enjoyable, trouble-free holidays", before pointing to minor problems, mostly (the bag-snatching variety). That's about right for every holidaymaker in trouble you read about, a million have nothing worse than a burnspot where the sun cream didn't reach or a queasy stomach from the jello.

John Westbook

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Grand Canyon and Monument Valley are tour top spots. Guy Marks found that they offer a lot more than the view

Dawn broke and flooded orange light across the canyon wall. A mule deer emerged from the shadows behind the juniper bushes. She sniffed the fresh morning air and trotted off, calmly and sure-footedly picking her way downhill across loose rocks.

In spite of leaving the comfort of my hotel bed at 4.30am and driving just six miles to the rim of the Grand Canyon before dawn, I was not the first on the Bright Angel Trail that day.

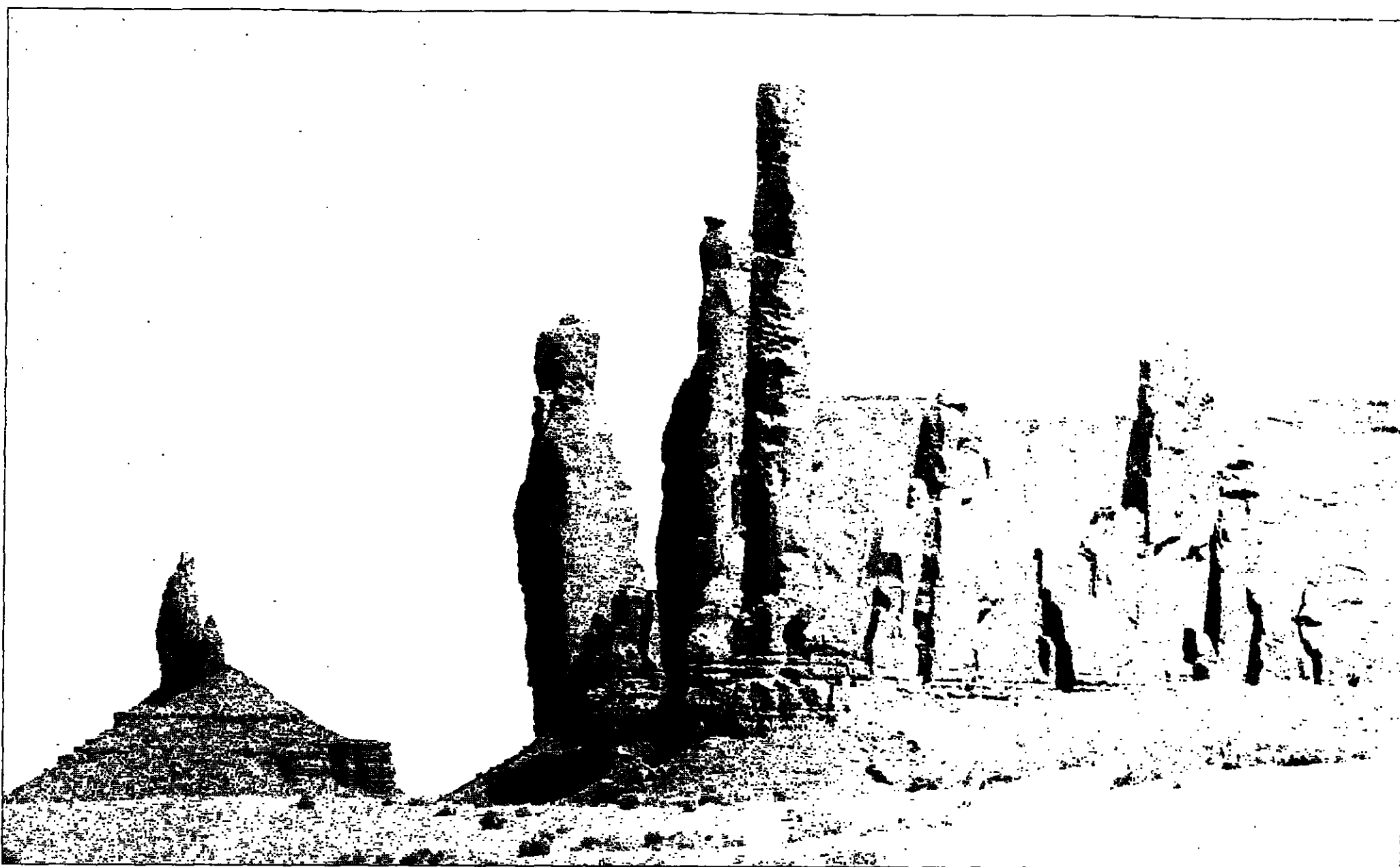
There were not many people, but I knew that as the day progressed I would be joined by a never-ending army of hikers who march the paths around the national park. It was therefore an unexpected pleasure to see wildlife at close quarters and to enjoy a moment of tranquillity in such a popular place.

Grand Canyon national park is top of the league of popularity, with far more to offer than the view. People come for the fishing and to raft the 277 miles (445km) of the Colorado River that runs through it. They come to photograph and to study its geology as well as to hike, horse-ride or just indulge in sightseeing. It was opened as a national park in the 1930s and the facilities were upgraded in the 1960s and 1970s to accommodate 1m visitors a year.

It was declared a World Heritage Site in 1979, but no one had predicted the massive influx of tourists that would arrive in the 1990s.

The park would be big enough to take the numbers if they were evenly distributed across the land area, but they are not. The greatest proportion visit the South Rim as opposed to the North Rim and with only two entrance gates they are channelled towards the visitors' centre and park headquarters at the Grand Canyon village.

Designated viewing points along the way are filled all day, but particularly at dawn and dusk, with visitors



Monument Valley, Arizona: It does not have the same crowds as the Grand Canyon, but it is still a big attraction with more than 1,000 visiting daily

Arizona – take the rail to the trail

ving for the best view, that special vista across the greatest chasm in the earth's surface. In the past 10 years the number of visitors has doubled. The park authorities undertook a management study in the mid-1990s, and came up with predictions that 5m people a year would be visiting by the millennium and 7m by 2010.

They were wrong. The figures have already reached 5m, way before time. When 7m is reached, the problem will not be the 39,200 visitors per day or the 19,500 visitors at any one time, but the 8,780 vehicles that they come in.

Faced with this monumental logistics problem, the

park authorities have come up with a solution. They have decided that they do not want to restrict access to people – just to cars.

A light railway will be built from the little town of Tusayan, just outside the park boundaries, covering the six miles to Mather Point and the Grand Canyon Village. Day visitors will have to leave their cars and take the train into the park. The first stage of development is to open the orientation centre in September 2000 and the rail will follow within a couple of years.

A transit hub will cater for 4,000 people an hour, taking visitors from the railroad out to an extended trail sys-

tem and cycle paths, using buses run on "alternative fuel". In the meantime, the existing shuttle bus service along the West Rim Drive has been expanded.

Last year saw the introduction of electric buses on the route and this season the older fleet of buses is being converted to liquefied natural gas engines. Although numbers are increasing faster than predicted, the current system seems to be coping. I did not find any delays or long queues, which is quite an achievement under those circumstances.

I spent the day walking down into the canyon and out to Plateau Point overlooking the Colorado.

Although there was rarely a moment of complete solitude, and at times there were too many people for my liking, at least the trail was

The good organisation was typical of the parks in Arizona

capable of supporting so much pedestrian traffic.

The path was clean and well maintained with plenty of facilities such as water

taps and the occasional toilet block. That is an important consideration when so many pass by in a day. This good organisation was typical of the parks in Arizona. I did, however, find it strange but refreshing that the parks are largely under-commercialised, with a limited range of shops, restaurants, stalls and even accommodation.

Monument Valley does not have the same crowds as the Grand Canyon, but it is still a big attraction with more than 1,000 visiting daily. Yet Goulding's hotel just outside the entrance and the park's small campsite are almost the only places to stay within 20 miles.

The visitors' centre is dull

with a small, tacky gift shop and little else. The main point of a visit, however, is to see the desert landscape with its monumental red-rock mesas, and the archaeological sites. These are the remains of homes built into caves and under overhanging rocks that were inhabited by the Anasazi Indians up until 1300. Navajo guides line up with truckloads of horses to take visitors into this sacred land.

I took a day trip from Goulding's led by Navajo Stanley Blackwater. After showing us some of the rock art at the habitation sites and getting his jeep stuck in the sand, Stanley led us to a hidden valley for lunch.

It seemed so quiet and remote that I would have believed him if he'd said that no one else went there, but a lavatory tucked away behind the pine trees was a clue to I think the Americans have got it right.

Arizona is blessed with some of the most impressive scenery in the world and it is still possible to enjoy it without being assaulted by commercialism. With considerable planning efforts, when the crowds come, it will still be a state of wide open spaces, hidden valleys and a little peace and quiet, allowing the consumer society to escape from its consumption.

The best of both worlds

David Spanier would bet his bottom dollar on the intimate gambling and ski resort, Lake Tahoe

If there is a more beautiful place anywhere in the United States than Lake Tahoe, I have yet to see it. The resort, which sits just on the Nevada side of the border with northern California, combines the best of both states.

Tahoe offers what can best be described as "gambling with a human face". Consider its advantages. Here, 6,200ft (1,890m) above sea level, is a 22 by 12 mile lake of pure water, ringed by snow-capped mountains and pine forests. It has remained, miraculously, unspoiled. The 70-mile drive around the lake shore offers view after view, across bay after bay, of soaring peaks set against green foliage and blue skies.

In summer, there are places to laze on the beach, which never seem crowded. Or you may sail across to a lakeside restaurant, to sip Chardonnay over a leisurely brunch.

In winter, there is Olympic-level skiing at Squaw Valley or Heavenly (well named) only minutes away. On the slopes there may be crowds, but American trails are quite different from the busy tracks which crisscross European resorts. The ski runs cover wide, saucer-shaped slopes, offering simple choices for novices.

But it is of course the gambling which gives Tahoe its character. There are four – and only four – casino hotels

plunked down just inside the Nevada border like Lego blocks, two by two facing each other.

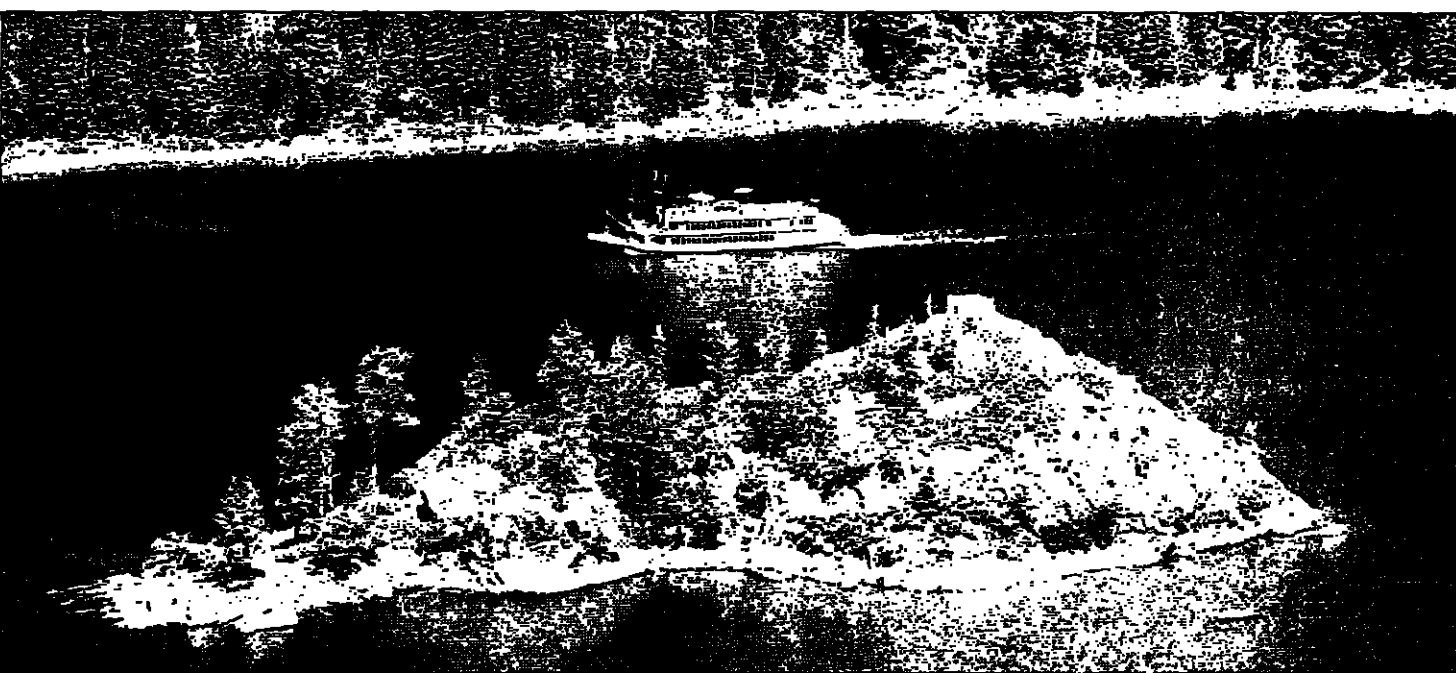
And here a curious and perhaps unique feature of the place as a gaming resort may be noted. Much to the chagrin of the casino operators, the gambling facilities are fixed by law and may not be expanded.

In other words the very thing which the casinos are not allowed to do is what gives Tahoe its appeal to visitors – its intimate scale.

No wonder the resort is described as "the best kept secret in America". It seems to have been discovered by a surprisingly large number of British tourists among its 2.3m visitors a year.

The most profitable casino is Harvey's and the most stylish is Caesar's Palace. Both offer pleasing restaurants and snack bars, looking out over the lake, which makes the sky room at Harvey's a great spot for dinner.

Both casinos cater to the middle-American public, with a cornucopia of slot machines fanning out in all directions, plus a swathe of table games such as black-



Lake Tahoe: In summer, you may sail across to a lakeside restaurant, to sip Chardonnay over brunch. In winter, there is skiing at Squaw Valley or Heavenly

jack, craps (dice) and roulette (but beware the double zero).

In the regular season, room prices in the top casino-hotels run from around \$119 (£73) for a double room from Sundays to

Thursdays and from \$149 on Fridays and Saturdays, rising in the summer season by about \$30 in each category.

But there are also plenty of cheap motels available, lined up across the border with California (where

casino gambling is not legal).

Low level gambling can be fun. After all, to risk a few coins in a slot machine, on the off-chance of hitting a jackpot paying the lucky winner thousands of dollars,

is not exactly the primrose path to addiction.

What is not so well known is that the casinos are very ready and willing to give regular players "comps" – that is, free drinks or meals or a ticket to a show,

depending on their action at the tables or slots. All you need to do is ask a casino executive how long you need to play to be "rated".

This does not mean, by the way, that a player must lose (which he or she probably

will anyway) but simply spend a certain amount of time gambling.

High rollers get free flights and luxury suites. But in these days of intense competition for customers, all casinos will also reward low rollers with comps in proportion. Why not take it, if it's going?

One of the features of Tahoe is the enthusiastic crowd of sun-tanned students and other young folk (minimum age to play is 21) who buzz into town at the weekends. They may be seen lining up, often three or four deep, around the tables, so keen are they to get their money down. I mention this because Tahoe casinos are more fun and more lively than the heavy-duty mass gaming scene typical of nearby Reno (75 minutes by road) or Las Vegas.

The big news in Tahoe is the plan to link the ski resort of Heavenly with the town by means of a two-mile long ski-lift. Work is expected to start soon. The main idea is to change the lake-side strip from its present commercial use, dominated by cars, into a pedestrian environment, with recreational and retail space, in Alpine village style.

When this project is completed, tourists will have the best of both worlds. Skiing by day and gambling by night, with hardly a pause in between.

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INDIA



Just sitting on top of the world

Giles MacDonogh is shaken and stirred by the time he reaches Darjeeling

You might have to travel a great distance to find quintessential Englishness in an hotel these days, and even then the chances are you will be disappointed. The Windamere Hotel is, indeed, a very long way away - in Darjeeling, 7,000ft up in the foothills of the Himalayas. But it is far from disappointing, seeming to exist in a world depicted in English films of the 1940s.

To get there you must first fly from Delhi or Calcutta to Bagdogra in northern Bengal. Then you have a choice: either hire a car for the perilously steep three-hour drive up the mountains, or take the train.

The narrow-gauge "toy train", as they call it, takes at least twice as long. Railway enthusiasts, however, appreciate being tugged along by steam locomotives built in Manchester and Glasgow more than a century ago. The tracks parallel the narrow main road as it ascends from the plains of Siliguri to the heights of Darjeeling, offering

unforgettable glimpses of the tea-gardens which cling to the sheer hillsides.

Whichever method you choose, you will arrive in Darjeeling shaken and stirred. If you stay at the Windamere, the next few minutes will pass like a dream. You hand over your passport, sign the register and are ushered into afternoon tea: their own variety of Darjeeling (believed to come from Tumsong estate), wafer-thin tomato sandwiches and cakes.

Meanwhile, your room is being prepared. At 5.30 a coal fire is lit in the grate and a hot-water bot-

tle popped into your bed to protect you from the cold Himalayan nights. Most, if not all, of the rooms seem to be large and old-fashioned. Faded photographs and oil paintings adorn the walls; and there are dressing rooms and bath-tubs with claw feet which seem to cry out for a gently fortifying dram of whisky before you face the evening's entertainment downstairs.

The Windamere's owners are conscious of the need to offer their guests some entertainment. Nepali dancers perform inside when it is cold, or sometimes in the walled garden in the summer.

A nip in the air brings forth hot brandy punch and pies.

Peak after peak towers over the hotel, culminating at the end of the valley in Kangchenjunga, at 28,145ft second only to Everest.

Basking in the sun on the terrace during the day you are likely to encounter "Madam" Tenduff-Lia, the hotel's 93-year-old owner, who still ambles amiably around with the aid of a stick. After dark the terrace is lined with braziers filled with hot coals to ward off the chill mountain air.

The hotel revolves around the dining room and the bar. All

meals (even tea) are included in the room rate, and meal-times are observed with a strictness reminiscent of a seaside boarding house. Breakfast is copious: fruit, porridge, bacon and eggs with chicken sausages, American muffins, toast, marmalade.

Having work to do in the tea-gardens, I failed to experience lunch, but the candlelit dinner was something special. To some extent this was attributable to the pianist, who nightly ran through her repertoire of Noel Coward songs, regaling package-tourists, nostalgic former planters, schoolmasters and writers

with "A room with a view" or "Somewhere I'll find you".

The daily printed menu is literally Anglo-Indian. First soup, then a confusing choice which, it transpires, is no choice at all. An English dish is presented alongside one from Nepal or Tibet. The English dish might be the delicious local pork that comes from the little, black hairy pigs which scuttles around the nearby villages. Usually, then, you are obliged to eat the local dish, too, before tackling some sticky, Anglo-Indian pudding.

Late nights are rare at the Windamere, but if you are lucky you

may catch the bar before it closes. Over a Black Dog whisky and soda you will find that the other guests loosen up and talk in scenes reminiscent of old films, about attempts to scale a local peak, or how much they paid for a shawl in the bazaar.

Of course, this sort of hotel doesn't appeal to everybody. The walls are thin in places and one morning I was woken at five by some Americans next door complaining of cold and lamenting the absence of air-conditioning.

On the terrace I listened to a party from the US who were comparing notes on their rooms. They found the absence of television burdensome. Maybe to enjoy the Windamere's peculiar pleasures you have to be English, or have a special feeling for the past.

■ The Windamere Hotel, Darjeeling, tel +91-354 54041, fax 54045. Double rooms from \$90 (\$30) full board. Payments must be made 30 days in advance. Giles MacDonogh's stay was arranged by Graves Travel (0171-486 6546).

Madras - with marriage in the air

Nick Haslam finds that his character is under the spotlight

The astrologer looked at me thoughtfully and then turned over a page or two. "You are," he said, "principled, usually cool-tempered, but prone to the occasional blustering and testiness." I nodded in a cool, measured fashion.

"And your future wife will be of medium height, round faced, slow talking and prone to problems of the uterus." He must have seen the flush of testiness in my features for he quickly went on. "But a remedial pilgrimage can change all that."

Marriage seemed to be in the air in Madras for, barely had I arrived, when my guide, an engaging woman called Renuka, had invited me to her cousin's wedding. We had just finished a whirlwind tour of the city, starting with St Mary's, the oldest Anglican church east of Suez. It was built in the 1680s by the British East India Company.

Complete with steeple and shady graveyard, only the hibiscus and pepper trees were a reminder that we were in fact in Tamil Nadu, and not some sleepy Sussex village.

The massive fort of St George nearby, though, said more about the real secular purpose of the Company when Madras, formerly three sleepy fishing villages on the Bay of Bengal, became its first base on the sub-continent.

Behind St George's high ramparts the counting houses of one of the most powerful commercial operations the world had ever seen were sheltered.

The fort today is a museum, and the many paintings of disapproving British functionaries in hot high collars attending the lavish durbars of cool, turbaned nabobs reflect the uneasy relationship which existed over the centuries between the colonialists and their unwilling hosts.

As dusk fell, I found myself in pride of place on the front row of the wedding hall. Open on three sides to warm tropical breezes, horns brayed, and the bride, looking resplendent in a blue and gold sari, entered followed by the groom.

For half an hour, the Brahmin priest and his assistant chanted prayers and sprinkled incense until at last the couple, who had been shielded from each other by a large sheet, were united by a ceremonial string.

Later, over a feast of vegetarian food served on banana leaves, the newlyweds asked me if I was married. Polite concern was voiced at my single state and a visit to the astrologer was mooted. "You must take the opportunity while you are here," I was told. "Your horoscope and that of your intended are most important."

But thoughts of future matrimonial bliss were more or



The Enfield motorcycle factory on the outskirts of Madras. As an enthusiast entering, it was a little like passing through the gates of paradise

less forgotten over the following days, for early next morning we set off for Kanchipuram, one of the seven holy cities for Hindus and a two-hour drive west of Madras. As we approached through paddy fields the high temple towers or gopurams loomed over wide stone tanks where women were washing clothes.

Black-robed pilgrims wandered among more than 125 ornately carved temples, some of which date back to the 7th century.

Beggars and holy men sat in the shade, and I was glad that Renuka had reminded me to pass out to the numerous hands stretched in our direction.

My favourite temple was

the massive Sri Ekambaram-athar, with 540 columns in its dark courtyard, built around the sacred 2,500-year-old mango tree where, according to legend, Parvati, wife of the great god Shiva, had done penance for many years.

Unwisely, she had playfully held her hands over the Lord's eyes, plunging the world into darkness and forcing him to open his third eye to restore the universe. Only after she had completed lifetimes of obeisance did Shiva relent, a punishment which even Renuka, a devoted Hindu, thought was a little over the top.

I stayed that night at the Ashok hotel at nearby Mahabalipuram, on the beach, and was up early next morning, as the fishermen put out to sea, to head back to Madras.

At Film City, a vast collection of sets and studios in the suburbs, where more films are produced than in Bombay, I met Mr Balasubramanian, the technical manager, whose office occasionally filled with the rapid beat of hooves and truncated

screams from the cutting rooms below.

"We make family films," he said. "Much singing, hard cuts, romance and never less than three hours long."

"Are there any films, perhaps, without singing?" I asked tentatively. "Oh no -

Another wedding party posed for a photo with a concrete shark

we call those art films - you must go to West Bengal if you want art films," said Mr Balasubramanian, a trifle disparagingly.

There was, alas, no shooting that day, but we were taken for a tour of the outdoor sets of Moghul Gardens, a Graeco-Roman temple, and a large concrete shark, where yet another wedding party posed for their photo.

Our next stop was the Enfield motorcycle factory

on the outskirts of Madras. I have to declare an interest here: having ridden an ancient British motorcycle for years, entering that factory, where gleaming new Enfields stood in rows, was a little like passing through the gates of paradise.

The last Royal Enfield made in the UK came off the production line in the 1960s, but here virtually the same distinctive design is still being produced. Under signs proclaiming "Enfield, all a man's first bike should be", I wandered through the factory with general manager Mr Shankar, as the new shift trickled into work.

"They are always slow to start," he said laughing. "You see, we have the most highly unionised labour force in the whole of India. What can we do?"

Inhaling deeply that heavy perfume of paint and fuel

which is peculiar to motorcycles the world over, we came to the test bed, where new machines were started up for the first time.

"Would you like to try one?" said Mr Shankar. Within minutes, I was pottering slowly around the factory enclosure with an

eastern grin, riding one of the latest Enfield products, a diesel-engined 328cc single. Only the security guards on the gate prevented me from hitting the open road then and there, but I knew, too, that the appointment with the astrologer was looming.

Gratefully I shook Mr Shankar's hand and, like any zealot, wished him well in keeping the Enfield on the road. "Oh we have no worries there," he said. "The bike is now becoming a macho symbol for young Indian men - and there are many of those."

The astrologer, an unkempt man in his 30s, having delivered his analysis of my character (pretty accurate it was too, I thought) consulted his books for the last time.

"The nuptials should take place after next May, when Jupiter passes out of the 12th house - but you are an elephant, and must not marry a lion," he said.

Forewarned, they say, is forearmed, and making a mental note to stay away from cats of all kinds, I walked back into the sunshine of the real world.

■ Nick Haslam flew to India with Air India (tel: 0171-485 7850). A return flight London-Madras is £453 but many travel agents offer discounted fares. The itinerary was organised by the Government of India Department of Tourism, 7 Cork Street, London. Tel: 0171-487 3671.

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Financial Times

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John Westbrooke and Jill James
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Premier (+44 01223-516877) can give you a week in Bangkok from \$449.

TravelMood offers 10 nights in Malaysia, with flights to Penang, from £399; details from +44 0171-258 0280. Asean Explorer (01481-823417) claims the cost of a 12-night trip to Bali, from \$536, is a 10-year low. Flying business class (with Gulf Air) from London to Bangkok, Jakarta or Manila costs just \$299 until the end of November with Bridge the World (0171-734 7440). Even in New Zealand, where the tourism industry is suffering from the disappearance of visitors from south-east Asia, Travel 2 (+44 0541-550068) has cut 20 per cent from self-drive holidays.

GRAND TOUR: Go around the world with 80 people as Orient-Express inaugurates its Great South Pacific Express down eastern Australia. A

10-country itinerary will include a private tour of Kensington Palace, masked Ball in Venice, Bedouin desert party and a Rajasthan banquet, and much more, with trips on three Orient-Express trains and Concorde. It leaves London next April and costs £38,000 - including everything. Itinerary from +44 0171-905 5080.

TRUNK ROAD: Amble through northern Thailand on elephant back for six days, as part of a luxury 13-day holiday with One + One Travel (+44 01935-812000). You get your own trekking crew and spend the nights camping or with hill tribe villages. "Your seat on the elephant is well padded," the brochure advises.

LAKELAND: A third of Malawi is water - 300-mile-long Lake Malawi, with golden beaches, islands and some hotels around its shores. Sunvil (+44 0181-332 9777) will get you to this little-visited African country, as an add-on to a safari or for a longer stay.

MAKE TRACKS: The Trans-Siberian train across Russia is 100 years old this year. Bridge the World offers



"Passage East" is a book filled with such delightful drawings and photographs, celebrating the golden age of the steamship, that one is almost tempted to cut them out and pin them on the wall. There are 52 paintings from maritime artist John Marshall supported by period pictures, maps and commentary by historian John Maxtone-Graham. Out in hardback, the book is published by Spinkhouse/Horval Press at £39.95 (159 pages). The painting above shows RMS Arcadia in Grand Harbour, Malta, in 1882, when the island was already a long-standing port of call on P&O's route from Great Britain to the east.

a variety of ways to share a remarkable experience of eastern life, including possible stopovers in Ekaterinburg, Siberian villages, the Gobi desert, Buddhist monasteries, Russian homes and Mongolian nomad tents. Call 0171-911 0900.

DEEP BLUE: Lose the blues at Indigo Bay - an exclusive resort on Bazaruto island, Mozambique. Stay in individual chalets, all with private facilities, and (when not relaxing) indulge in the many activities (some included): fly and deep-sea fishing, snorkelling and

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HIGH SOCIETY: See a tasha in Bhutan - that's a festival, in the remote and rarely visited Himalayan kingdom - with Steppes East (+44 01285-810287); the £2,995 trip, leaving London on September 26, visits India too.

SWING LAO: The annual

boat race on the Mekong River in Vientiane is a lively affair: after a night of spirit worship, men spend two days racing longboats, while women sing rude songs and question their sexual prowess. Watch it with Symbiosis (+44 0171-924 5906); a 16-day trip leaving Bangkok on September 23, costs £395 plus flights.

LAND, SEA AND AIR: Go on a safari with a difference - a 10-day wildlife tour of Mexico with Union-Castle Travel (0171-229 1411); you'll see millions of monarch butterflies waiting to fly to Canada, turtles hatching, whales migrating. You stay in big luxury or small, elegant hotels. Best months: November to February; price from £2,880.

INDIAN SUMMER: Ah, the things to do on the subcontinent. Eat your way round India with Cox & Kings (+44 0171-973 5000) on a tailor-made tour taking in cooking demonstrations and tasting of north and south India cuisine. Or unwind at Rajvillas, a Jaipur hotel with India's first luxury spa, combining western aromatherapy and Indian ayurvedic health principles. "Aromavada" treatments Greaves Travel (+44 0171-487 9111). Or go to the famous Pushkar camel fair - November 1-4 - with camel racing, traditional dancing and 50,000 camels for sale. Explore's 22-day tour costs £1,360; call +44 01252-344161. Or try a touch of the Raj at Darjeeling hill station on a tour with Imaginative Traveller (+44 0181-742 8612), with side-trip to Sikkim.

TAKE IT EASY: See Nepal the easy(ish) way with a Gentle Trekking and Luxury Lodges trip with Himalayan Kingdoms (+44 0171-823 7163). Stroll the Annapurna foothills, drift down the Seti River, meet the people from £1,550.

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ORIENT YOURSELF: The Peninsula hotel, Hong Kong, offers a four-day Chinese Cultural Experience programme in October and November: find out about feng shui (bring your house plans), tai chi, herbal medicine, dim sum-making, tea-preparing, brush-painting. Book through Leading Hotels of the World: 0800-181123.

AIR PRESUMPTIVE: See Africa the old way, on private flights during the day and first-class hotels at night. Air Voyages of Distinction has adapted a Boeing 767 to seat 106 passengers (instead of 237) and two departures next year will explore spots such as Mauritius, the Skeleton Coast, Mt Kilimanjaro and the Victoria Falls. Details from +44 0181-464 4488.

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ARABIA FELIX: Yemen is only gradually attracting the attention of travellers with its scenery and its striking ancient skyscrapers. Take a 12-day trip with Steppes East (+44 01285-810287) and visit the walled city of Sana'a, the

medieval capital of Taiz, the desert town of Shibam, and Marib, the Queen of Sheba's capital (probably). The escorted tour leaves on October 11 and costs from £1,930.

THE TIME: Tee off somewhere different with Southern Cape Golf Tours (+44 01252-783804). Courses include Elephant Hills at Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, and Sun City, Swaziland (crocodiles at the 13th hole). Mauritius, Namibia and, of course, South Africa are available; escorted tours go in the northern winter, but tailor-made and fly-drive tours can be set up whenever you want.

WILD AND WOOLLY: See a quokka on a 23-day guided wildlife trip to Australia with Naturetrek (+44 01962-733051), leaving on October 5 and costing £2,995. There'll be pink-eared ducks and koalas in Perth, dugongs in Shark Bay, sealions off Esperance, noisy scrub-birds in Two People's Bay (the only place they exist)... Flora too, from spring wildflowers to harri forests. Quokka? A small, friendly wallaby.

JUST DESERTS: Saudi Arabia must be the biggest, richest, best-known country that no outsider ever goes to - until now. Bales introduces 10-day tours, from £1,995, next year, looking at traditional architecture, isolated valleys, deserts, Nabatean rock tombs (like Petra's). Tourism is new, patience will be needed, and unmarried couples won't get visas. Tel: +44 01306-855681.

POLAR BARNES: Head off from Winnipeg to see the polar bear migration, and the northern lights too, on a nine-night tour with Abercrombie & Kent (+44 0171-559 8620) in October 1999. Two day-long excursions will provide close-up viewing and photography of the bears and their young. Cost: £3,910.

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RIDE 'EM COWBOYS: The Calgary Stampede takes place next July 9-18: cowboys riding wild horses bareback, chuckwagons racing, musical variety shows, and all in sight of the Rockies. Kuopii guests can buy a 599 Stampede package when they stay at the Delta Bow Valley Inn downtown: seven nights including flights from £1,049. Tel: +44 01306-742888.

GAME DRIVE: Take a self-drive safari in Tanzania with Safari Drive (01488-831611): for £1,890 and up you get a Land Rover, and suggested 15-day itineraries including stays in the Ngorongoro Crater and the Serengeti in lodges and tented camps. You also stay on Mafia Island (but hopefully won't have to sleep with the fishes).

OVERS DOWN UNDER: Visit Australia and you can see not only the opera house and hats with bits of cork hanging from them, but the last two Ashes cricket tests. If you take an Australvel package, Leave December 23, watch England triumph, and come back on January 6, all for £1,337. Call 0171-734 7755.

AFJORDABLE: Take a two-day tour of the fjords of... Oman, by dhow and 4WD; bordering the Strait of Hormuz are 600km of cliffs, lakes, coral reefs and deserted beaches, open to the public only since 1994, says Arabian Odyssey (+44 01242-224482). Excursion costs from £548.

SYDNEY Opera House is 25 in October; call Aussie Helpline (0801-070707) for a list of the many celebrations.

AFRICAN Experience cuts up to 15 per cent off holiday prices to South Africa as the rand tumbles. Call 0890-188 246.

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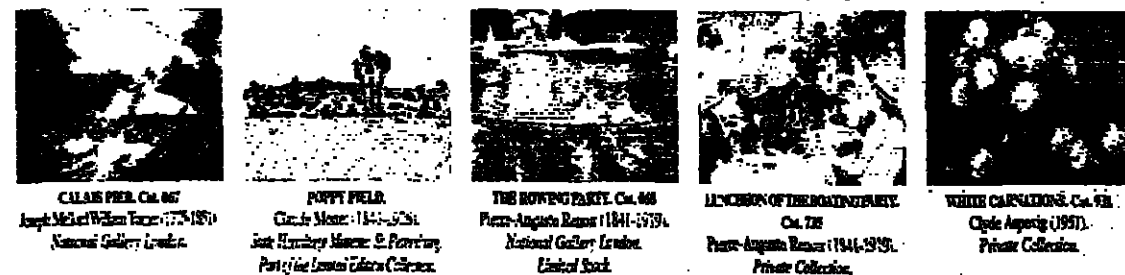
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TAILPIECE

■ This weekend marks Heritage Open Days in most of Britain, when a variety of properties of historical and architectural interest, not normally accessible, are opened free to the public. Belle Tout Lighthouse at Beachy Head, for instance, the country's only residential lighthouse, opens its doors to the public for the first time this century. You can see the second world war headquarters of Flight Command at RAF Bentley Priory, Starnmore, the new Russian Library at the University of Lancaster, the private Ink Pen Post Box Museum in Taunton and a host of others. Details on 0891-800603 (50p a minute) or on the internet

at www.civictrust.org.uk. Other regions' open days are handled separately: for Scotland, where openings are staggered over weekends throughout the month, call 0141-221 1456; Northern Ireland, 01232-543078; Wales, 01222-494606. The most concentrated collection of properties is in London, and will be open next weekend. Among new show homes: Lloyd's building, designed by Richard Rogers Partnership, and Alfred Waterhouse's Prudential insurance headquarters. The event has proved highly popular - up to 200,000 visitors in 1994 to 500,000 last year - and if you want to see St Pancras

Station Hotel or the Foreign Office, expect to queue for hours. But there are always undervalued hidden gems: Art Deco cinemas, architects' homes, medieval barns, civic buildings and many more. Details from 0891 800 061 (from 39p a minute) or <http://www.londonopenhouse.demon.co.uk>. The Heritage Open Days are promoted in part by the Council of Europe, and involve 44 countries: Russia and San Marino have been on display, but others open on various weekends this month (Germany tomorrow, France and Italy next weekend) through to Bosnia on October 9. Information from Brussels: +32 2540 0277.

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